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**BREATHING NEW LIFE INTO DEAD-RECKONING:  
A PROPOSAL FOR THE NEXT NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY**

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**Dead reckoning.** 1 *Navigation* A method of estimating the position of an aircraft or ship without astronomical observation, as by applying to a previously determined position the course and distance traveled since 2 Calculation based on inference or guesswork <sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The American President, Henry Adams wrote, "resembles the commander of a ship at sea He must have a helm to grasp, a course to steer, a port to seek " The course and the port constitute the first requirement for Presidential greatness Great Presidents possess, or are possessed by, a vision of an ideal America Their passion is to make sure the ship of state sails on the right course <sup>2</sup>

History is speaking to President William J Clinton Henry Adams and Arthur M Schlesinger, Jr , quoted above, have provided their prescription for greatness Poised on the verge of a second term, Clinton seems to have the pre-requisite vision He knows his destination, and he knows its general direction Steering the best course poses the greater challenge To extend the historians' analogy, powerful storms can easily disorient the unwary mariner as he tries to navigate the high seas of domestic and international politics The helm must be firmly grasped to resist buffeting forces, the course must be periodically adjusted to compensate for a capricious environment. The able mariner needs both compass and helm A President-- a great President-- needs a strategy

President Clinton has at his disposal the appropriate device The National Security Strategy of the United States (NSS) is presented annually to Congress by the President as required by the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 The purpose of this paper is revisit related issues

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<sup>1</sup> "Dead reckoning", Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1986 ed

<sup>2</sup> Arthur M Schlesinger, Jr , "The Ultimate Approval Rating," The New York Times Magazine 15 Dec 1996 50

presented in an earlier study I participated in at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government<sup>3</sup> In 1992, I argued that President Bush's NSS made for poor strategy My thesis was that the document's shortcomings were dictated by the process that produced it

Has this President learned from the mistakes of his predecessor? Has he configured his strategy-making process in a way that will place the ship of state on a course headed fair into the twenty-first century? In this paper, I will critically assess the Clinton Administration's latest NSS and its process, and offer a procedural alternative that may improve future submissions

### On Strategy

Strategy is a design for relating means to ends<sup>4</sup> National security strategy is a nation's design for relating the resources at its disposal-- the instruments of national power-- to the securing of its interests These simple definitions tend to obscure the complex challenges facing today's would-be strategists Some commentators on the subject, Samuel Huntington and Edward Luttwak among them, suggest the challenges to be beyond the capacity of the American statesman Huntington claims that the notion that the United States could produce national strategy is nothing more than a chimera<sup>5</sup> Luttwak agrees, describing strategic thinking as

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Landrum, Joseph Corcoran, Richard White, and Christopher McNamara, Making National Security Strategy Process, Paralysis, and a New Path (Cambridge, MA: National Security Program Discussion Paper Series 92-04, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 1992)

<sup>4</sup> Admiral James D. Watkins, "The Maritime Strategy," U.S. Naval Institute's Proceedings, Special Supplement, 1986, preface

<sup>5</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, "The Evolution of U.S. National Strategy," U.S. National Strategy for the 1990's, ed. Daniel J. Kaufman (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 11-18

antithetical to the American cultural tradition of pragmatic, short-term problem solving<sup>6</sup> There is evidence to the contrary NSC 68, the document which codified the ends and means of the Cold War, is considered by some a masterpiece of national strategy And since 1986, we have produced nine versions of the National Security Strategy of the United States

So, why the skepticism of Huntington and Luttwak? First, good strategy is hard to do A design for relating national means to national ends must be complex and richly textured The strategy's complexity is determined by two factors the number and compatibility of the objectives, and the environment within which the strategy will be executed

The decision to take a strategic approach implies a rational effort to apply limited resources to achieve a set of objectives The strategic approach forces choice The strategist must choose those objectives that are worth the expenditure of limited resources-- he must prioritize

The environment of a national security strategy also dictates its complexity It includes domestic and international dimensions It is populated by threats to national interests, competition for finite resources, and the resources themselves, including the talents, needs, and potential of the American people The environment is dynamic, it changes over time and warrants constant measurement Threats can wax or wane, the characteristics of the constituencies to which the national leader is tied can shift Witness our own era, it would be difficult to find another 10 year period of relative peace during which the strategic environment changed so dramatically

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<sup>6</sup> Edward N. Luttwak, On the Meaning of Victory, (New York: Simon Hill, 1982) 243

In addition to the integration of objectives, resources, and environments, an effective strategy must be endowed with the following characteristics

- ◆ **ACHIEVABLE** The means must be commensurate with the ends The strategy must be plausible
- ◆ **MEASURABLE** Objectives must be defined in a way that makes achievement and interim progress apparent The strategist must be able to recognize if and when an adjustment to the strategy is called for
- ◆ **ARTICULATED AND COMMUNICATED** Those charged with executing the strategy must understand the plan The NSS must clearly describe the support required of the bureaucracy, the Congress, the American people
- ◆ **CULTURALLY AND POLITICALLY RESONANT** The NSS should inspire the support described above It must speak to the real world, recognizing the values and concerns of its various audiences, including the people, Congress, the media, the bureaucracy, international friend and foe
- ◆ **INFORMS CHOICE** The NSS must provide the guidance necessary for subordinate agencies to recognize which of several competing priorities should be satisfied first, second, third, etc

Indeed, creating effective strategy is a difficult task Our record in that effort since NSC 68 is the second cause for the skepticism of Huntington and Luttwak

Strategic thought in the United States between 1950 and 1986 was moribund No official document during that period qualifies as a successor to NSC 68 In 1986, Congress demanded a national security strategy The Goldwater-Nichols legislation requires a comprehensive NSS

consistent with my earlier definition “proposed short-term and long-term uses of the political, economic, military and other elements of national power to promote the [national] interests and objectives”<sup>7</sup> The President must submit the report annually with his budget, in both classified and unclassified form

Prior to the Clinton Administration, the NSS never accompanied the budget submission. None of the three Presidents subject to the law has submitted a classified version.

If the letter of the law has been loosely enforced, has the President at least submitted strategy consistent with the characteristics described above? In a word-- no. The language in the strategies of 1987, 1991 and 1996 (the first two were addressed in my earlier study) is too general and imprecise to be useful in prescribing courses of action. Of the 45 pages that make up the 1996 version, the equivalent of fully 20 pages are devoted to the Administration’s national security achievements over its first three years in office.<sup>8</sup> These are considerable, but they do not constitute a strategy for the future.

NSS 96 is polished, well-written, and replete with the rhetoric of strategy. It has succeeded in shedding the language of the Cold War, focusing more appropriately on economic strength rather than countering military threats. It does not, however, engage in the difficult parts of strategy. It does not, for example, prioritize among interests competing for finite resources. It does not inform choice.

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<sup>7</sup> 50 USC 402, Title 1 of the National Security Act of 1947

<sup>8</sup> The White House, A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement (Washington, D C USG PO, 1996)

The most telling feature of NSS 96, like the earlier versions, is its obscurity. The annual submission has not been debated in Congress since the first in 1987. Prominent members of Administrations past and present, along with academics and journalists, either are unaware of the document or dismiss it as something other than strategy.<sup>9</sup> The NSS to date has been neither politically nor culturally resonant.

A member of the NSC staff that put pen to paper for the 1988 version offers a cynical but telling explanation for its imprecision and obscurity:

What President in a fast-paced, media-oriented world wants to articulate, in a static, written report, a detailed statement of his forward-looking strategic vision? If there was ever a sure-fired means of ensuring that your boss would be "hoisted on his own petard", this was it. To influence resource allocations, it was considered far better to report "Globaloney" to Congress.<sup>10</sup>

Admittedly, the NSS is and must be a political document. But, is there another reason for the strategy's shortcomings, a reason that lends itself to constructive criticism and corrective action?

### On Process

Process is a systematic series of actions directed to some end.<sup>11</sup> Its components include actors and their actions, which include direction, net assessment, design, and resource allocation.

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<sup>9</sup> These reactions were offered by a series of guest speakers at the National War College during the period August - December 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Don M. Snider, The National Security Strategy: Documenting Strategic Vision (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 1992) 4.

<sup>11</sup> "Process", Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1986 ed.



- ♦ *Direction* In a broad statement of vision, values, and principles, a leader provides guidance to the rest of the process. In the case of NSS, the President should perform this function. His vision statement begins to inform choices and suggest priorities for ensuing stages of the process.
- ♦ *Net Assessment* This activity involves the collection and analysis of information relevant to the design phase of the process. Net assessment describes the environment: available resources, competition for those resources, and threats to the values, principles, and interests articulated in the vision statement. It predicts the future environment based upon current trends. The intelligence establishment and the agencies subsequently charged with executing the strategy perform collection and analysis. The assessment writ large, however, must be performed by someone above the bureaucratic fray, someone other than the collectors and analysts. That someone must be able to discern institutional bias: has an agency exaggerated its circumstances, its competitive environment in order to garner more resources? Assessment must be performed by those with a demonstrable appreciation of the big picture-- by the strategists.
- ♦ *Design* This is the pivotal action in the process, the point at which means are related to ends. The strategist must formulate specific, achievable, and prioritized objectives consistent with both the President's vision and the net assessment. He must translate the design into written form, in actionable terms. In so doing, the strategist communicates the design-- the strategy-- to the President, who subsequently communicates it to subordinate departments and agencies, to Congress, and to the American people.

- ◆ *Resource Allocation.* This is the first point at which the strategy can be measured by tangible results. If it has been articulated and communicated, if it is politically and culturally resonant, if it informs choice, then resources will be appropriately allocated by subordinate departments and by Congress.
- ◆ *Actors.* The roles played by the President, Congress, and the bureaucracy are reasonably well-defined. But, what of the National Security Strategist? I have described skills and duties that would challenge a Renaissance Man. The challenge is more the domain of a group of strategists, capable of thinking without partisan prejudice. A more realistic alternative, perhaps, is a bipartisan group of strategists.

The current process has not evolved significantly since its inception in 1987.<sup>12</sup> It begins with tasking from Congress, not the President. The NSS is compiled principally by the NSC Staff, specifically by military officers within the office of the Senior Director for Defense Policy. They lay out the structure of the document and draft the introduction based on their reading of the past year's Presidential statements. They task various departments and agencies to prepare their appropriate sections of the document, providing the draft introduction as guidance.

The coordinators incorporate the sections from interagency participants into a composite draft, which is then circulated to the NSC Staff Senior Directors for concurrence and comment. Following an editorial review by the National Security Advisor, the final draft is transmitted to

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<sup>12</sup> This description of the current strategy-making process was developed through personal interviews with Rear Admiral Don Pilling and Captain Joe Sestak in September 1991 and December 1996, respectively. Each headed the office within the NSC Staff responsible for compiling the NSS documents in those years.

Department Secretaries, Agency Directors, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In 1991, only the Chairman replied with an editorial input. In 1996, the strategy's NSC staff coordinator at least insisted on a written response from those to whom the draft was submitted. In both years, unanimous concurrence was achieved on the first circulation.

The President offered no guidance to and engaged in no dialogue with his strategists. In fact, the "strategists" were staff members chosen for their positions to perform other tasks, based on criteria appropriate to those primary tasks. They were not selected for their skills as strategic thinkers (that at least one of those interviewed is a most proficient strategist is only serendipitous). At no point in the development of either NSS 91 or 96 did any individual or group of participants engage in a net assessment of the geopolitical situation.

A strategic approach implies that strategy guides resource allocation decisions. If decisions are to be governed by a bigger picture than a mosaic created by narrowly focused interest groups, then the debate must be framed by a strategy. This argues for a carefully crafted strategy-making process. If one studies successful strategies of the past, like NSC 68, and the corporate world's approach to strategic planning, several important principles emerge that might guide the development of an effective process.

- ♦ *Strategy lasts, so you better do it well.* This poses an important paradox. Strategy is really no more than a design for dealing with an uncertain and changing environment, no strategy should be carved in granite. Yet history tells us that, once committed to a strategy, nations generally stick with it until a catalytic event occurs. This is true whether the strategy is formally adopted, as was NSC 68, or tacitly accepted, as was isolationism in the aftermath of

the First World War. This principle argues for selecting the best and the brightest to write the strategy, men and women with little or no institutional loyalties, a group capable of grasping the big picture and giving it historical perspective.

- ◆ *A dynamic environment demands permanent process.* Strategies devised by governments last mostly because of institutional resistance to change. Short of precipitating catalytic events, the solution requires an institutional adjustment, one intended to recognize the need for, and then to foster, change. This is the corporate approach to strategy developed by such companies as Hewlett-Packard. Care must be taken, however, to change occasionally the population of the process, to infuse the best and brightest with fresh faces.
- ◆ *The leader must "own" the strategy.* A national strategy is going to be closely identified with the President. He must, therefore, be directly involved at key points in the process. He must engage in face-to-face dialogue with the strategists in developing a strategic vision which will thematically drive the design. He must then officially promulgate the strategy in writing. The process should commit the President to something that reflects his thinking, not just that of his strategists. An official strategy committed to writing provides the bureaucracy with something on which it can take action.
- ◆ *Strategists need the freedom to be wrong.* Strategy development is not a science. The complexity and dynamism of the environment argue for a cyclic process, one that routinely assesses the effectiveness of the original product. Strategists need to know that their product will not lead the nation down a path from which there is no recourse. The unfortunate alternative is a short-sighted, narrowly focused product. Likewise, the President needs to provide his strategists with reasonable insulation from various interest groups with a stake in

the final shape of the strategy. If pressure is brought to bear to satisfy each of these groups, the result will be a non-actionable document without a prioritized scheme of national interests -- much like NSS 96.

Can we create a better strategy by employing these principles, one that will better serve the President and the nation? I believe we can.

### A Better Way

I propose the establishment by Executive Order of an Office of National Strategy (ONS) within the Executive Office of the President.

Organizational Setting and Relationships ONS would be off-line with respect to the current national security apparatus. It would report directly to the President on matters of strategy and to the White House Chief of Staff for administrative purposes. It would have complete access to information held by all executive agencies and departments, and would call upon them to provide information for purposes of analysis and assessment.

*Rationale* ONS must be off-line in order to minimize layers between the President and the strategists with whom he should have regular dialogue. This is the President's strategy staff. The tendency of cells embedded within any extant bureaus is to become engaged in the current operations of that bureau. This is especially true of the logical home for national security strategists, the NSC Staff, which is dominated by a political-military perspective at a time when

national interests are expanding beyond defense and foreign relations. National strategists must look beyond the interests of any one organization.

Internal Organization and Composition ONS should consist of two groups. The first, the Strategy Development Council, or SDC, would be a periodically convened group of about 10 prominent thinkers, writers, and practitioners, successful men and women of national and international renown from a variety of backgrounds. They should be people of cabinet-level stature. They might be from the other political party or simply too controversial to survive the confirmation process. Two members of the SDC would be selected by a conference of House and Senate leadership, they would be elected officials: governors, mayors, state legislators, or members of Congress. The President would select the remaining members of the SDC.

The SDC would be complemented and supported by a permanently assigned Strategy Development Staff (SDS) consisting of about four strategic specialists drawn from the corporate world, academia, and government. Together the two groups would develop the initial strategy and conduct biannual reviews and updates.

The permanent SDS would also monitor the execution and effectiveness of the strategy between regular reviews. It would conduct liaison with those other agencies required for net assessment, as well as interact with the Congress on all matters relating directly to the Strategy. The SDS would be headed by a Director who would facilitate and coordinate the efforts of the two groups in their strategy design, but would not exercise authority over the SDC. (The position should not be construed as the National Strategist.) The Director should also recommend to the President special meetings of the SDC when events warrant.

*Rationale* The ad hoc character of the SDC is intended to overcome the incrementalism that plagues our government. The purpose of the SDC is to provide the fresh look often needed to jar an organization out of comfortable complacency.

The SDS, on the other hand, is needed to ensure that the Strategy, once promulgated is being executed. It should also serve the President as the agent of change, that is, educate other agencies about the strategy and its intended implications. The SDS could advise other agencies on how to act strategically as an organizational unit within the framework of the national strategy.

The size of both groups is small by usual standards for a task of this breadth and import, and with good reason. If participants of the desired caliber and stature are to be attracted, they must be assured that their input will be a substantial factor. A common-sense test was also applied to the size, the group should be able to work comfortably around a conference table at key points in the process: to receive information, to discuss it, and to decide on an outcome. This must be a responsive group that can deliver an actionable product.

The composition of the groups may be the least concrete aspect of this proposal. Just as I have not engaged in a discussion of what the strategy should say, I will not name names. I emphasize, however, that a strategic enterprise is bound to be enriched if party affiliation is ignored in the selection process. There is a wealth of talent throughout America and across disciplines, professions, and party lines.

The Product Twice during each presidential term the ad hoc group, the SDC, would convene in concert with the SDS to produce the National Strategy of the United States or a revision thereof. Any substantive changes to a previous edition would be summarized in a preface. The Strategy

would be promulgated in the form of either an Executive Order or a National Security Decision Directive. The Strategy should be in the hands of subordinate agencies and departments at least six months prior to the subsequent budget submission to Congress. This adjustment to the current annual submission schedule will require legislation to modify the Goldwater-Nichols Act.

Each alternate year, the SDS will prepare a report to the President on the Strategy's effectiveness using specific, quantifiable measures of effectiveness designated by the SDC when the Strategy is first developed. A copy of the report will be provided to Congress.

The Strategy should be closely held until after it has been presented to and discussed with a bipartisan conference of congressional leaders. At that point it may be publicized.

*Rationale.* National Strategy must be issued as a directive if it is to govern the application of national resources to national objectives. Subordinate agencies must abide by its guiding principles and priorities; they must understand that their performance will be measured against criteria established in the Strategy.

The timing of the Strategy is intended to ensure that subordinate agencies understand their objectives when requesting resources. There must be a rational and perceptible relationship between objectives and resource requests. Congress deserves this coherent and integrated justification when authorizing and appropriating funds.

The Strategy in its early draft stages must be closely held so that the President, his strategists, and the congressional leadership will be free to discuss potentially controversial means for securing national interests without fear of stirring public anxiety about, for example, the future of various entitlement programs. The Strategy, after all, is supposed to be an expression of presidential leadership, not a reflection of every public preference. The Strategy should not be



subjected to potential partisan or media sabotage until it has extracted the full benefit of the entire process. We cannot stop the march of time and events, but the strategy's capacity to lend order to a noisy debate rests in its creation in a forum removed from the din

## Conclusion

Even the best navigator, wielding a finely tuned sextant or the latest in nautical electronics, can report to the Captain only on where he has been, on ground already traveled. The true seaman applies his hard earned skills to the projection of where he will be and to actions that will get him there with precision. So it is with the National Strategist. A National Strategy document laden with past accomplishments and policies may serve a political purpose, it will not serve a strategic one.

NSS 97, the first of President Clinton's second and final term, presents a unique opportunity. If seized, the President could present a clear and detailed vision of where America is headed and how it will get there. He could do so unconstrained by concerns with re-election. He can do so only by modifying the process.

I do not contend that the relationship between process and strategy is that of a simple "if A, then B" proposition. configure the right process and effective strategy will emerge. That proposition ignores factors of motivation, will, and politics. The perfect process will not achieve success unless the leader recognizes the need for a strategic approach and perceives that need to be sufficiently urgent to warrant coopting or compelling those elements of the organization that are not convinced by the merits of the strategic argument. The best we can work toward is a procedural framework that maximizes the opportunity for success.

I do assert the obverse of the earlier proposition, that is, configure the process poorly, and good strategy will not result. A process that does not employ strong leadership and vision, net assessment, and a sophisticated design is condemned to dead-reckoning-- to guesswork.

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